

BOX ELDER ROAD
Between 104th and 112th Avenues,
Hudson and Watkins Roads
Vicinity of Watkins
Adams County
Colorado

HAER No. CO-65

HAER
COLO
1-WATK.V
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HAER
COLO
-WATK.V
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
BOX ELDER ROAD

HAER No. CO-65

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: Box Elder Road is located on the west side of Box Elder Creek. Historically, the road ran about 40 miles north and slightly west along the west side of Box Elder Creek. The southern terminus is Box Elder Station, later Watkins. The northern terminus was the confluence of Box Elder Creek and the South Platte River, approximately 12 miles southeast of modern Greeley, Colorado. The extant segments are concentrated in Section 12 of Township 2S, Range 65W.

Quad: Horse Creek, CO

UTMs: A: 13:533420, 4416305
B: 13:533570, 4415680

Date of Construction: ca. 1860 (modifications 1885, 1890)

Present Owner: City and County of Denver
Denver International Airport
Stapleton International Airport
Denver, Colorado 80207

Present Use: Abandoned

Significance: Box Elder Road's significance arises from its role in the development of transportation networks on the Colorado plains during the late nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s Box Elder Road provided access to John W. Iliff's

ranch and others along the South Platte River from the Goodnight-Loving Cattle Trail. Additionally, Box Elder Road offered pioneers a route between the Smoky Hill North Trail and the South Platte Trail, two of the foremost pioneer trails to Colorado. By the early 1880s both of those trails had been replaced by rail routes to Denver. This resulted in changes to the northern and southern termini of the road, but Box Elder Road continued to connect major travel routes through Colorado. By the 1880s, the twenty years of customary usage led Arapahoe County to recognize the route as a county road in 1883. After it was split off from Arapahoe County in 1902, Adams County continued to recognize Box Elder Road as a county road until the 1940s. The extant remains offer evidence of the expedient nature of early road building efforts in Colorado as undertaken by local residents and counties.

Project Statement:

There are no plans to disturb these remains of Box Elder Road.

This HAER recording project is part of both the historic preservation plan for the Denver International Airport and a long term program to document historically significant engineering and industrial works in the United States. The City and County of Denver through the Denver International Airport provided funding for the project.

Historian:

Steven F. Mehls, Western Historical Studies, Inc., February, 1992

II. HISTORY

Pioneers developed trails and roads to serve a variety of purposes during Colorado's territorial period. Many trails, such as the South Platte Trail, had their origins before the gold rush of 1859 as Indian routes or trappers' trails. Early settlers used these trails for convenience. Pioneers built other trails to meet their needs for a communication and travel network to and from various points such as trade centers. Still other trails came about because of the open range cattle business that developed during the Civil War and flourished from 1865 to the late 1880s. These cattle trails were long and meandering, but quite serviceable. Topography, available water and ease of travel influenced the routings of all of Colorado's early roads. Not surprisingly, many of the trails followed the general course of a major creek or river, such as the route under discussion here that approximately paralleled Box Elder Creek. Later, when Colorado counties established road systems, they often adopted the trails as roads, officially recognizing their customary usage.¹

The lands along Box Elder Creek offered certain advantages, especially for people moving large herds of livestock, that other routes could not. The creek passed through gently rolling terrain from its headwaters near the Monument Divide northeast of modern Colorado Springs north to the South Platte River. The route offered water and forage for the herds. Also, the route split the distance from Denver east to Bijou Creek, giving travellers an alternative to the heavily travelled Bijou Creek route (see regional map, HABS CO-123).

The Box Elder Creek route offered direct access from the south to first Elbridge Gerry's ranch, east of modern Greeley, Colorado, and later John W. Iliff's Crow Creek Ranch, also east of modern Greeley. Elbridge Gerry settled in Colorado before the gold rush of 1859. Some time during the gold rush excitement, probably in 1860, he moved his family to the confluence of Crow Creek and the South Platte River. This is a point about 10 miles from modern Greeley, Colorado, close to the mouth of Box Elder Creek. There Gerry established a modest ranch and trading post. He prospered trading with settlers and emigrants on the South Platte Trail. Gerry's ranch operations are not well documented, but his fame can be dated to the Indian War of 1864 when he acted as a guide to Major Jacob Downing's First Colorado Volunteers. Also, much of the activity in the campaign centered on Crow Creek and to the east of there along the South Platte River. Sources that discuss the Indian War clarify two things germane to the history of Box Elder Road. First, by 1864 Gerry's ranch already enjoyed recognition as a point of importance on the South Platte Trail.

Second, livestock raising, an activity that would figure prominently in the history of Box Elder Creek and the adjacent road for the next 25 years, took root during the early 1860s.² Such a position cannot be overlooked for an explanation regarding the viability of the Box Elder Road route during the 1860s as a connection between Box Elder Station near modern Watkins, Colorado, on the Smoky Hill North Trail and the South Platte Trail (see HABS CO-123). Box Elder Station, built by Ben Holladay's Central Overland California and Pike's Peak Express stage line, was a meal stop for his stagecoaches.³ Watkins replaced Box Elder Station as the terminus of Box Elder Road by 1870 because of the town's location on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Box Elder Road thus began its useful life as a connector between two major trails in Colorado during the early 1860s, but became a feeder route to the primary cattle trails to Colorado during the 1870s and 1880s and received final recognition as a county road.⁴ By the time Arapahoe County recognized the road in 1883 it had been an important route for cattlemen for two decades.⁵

In addition to the stage and wagon roads from the Mississippi Valley, three cattle trails reached northeastern Colorado from Texas during the 1860s.⁶ The first route was the Goodnight or Goodnight-Loving Trail. Charles Goodnight, the trail's namesake, developed a reputation as one of Colorado's most able trailmasters and a respected member of various cattlemen's organizations. Cowboys assembled herds on the Goodnight Trail in west Texas and then proceeded north-northwest from that state's panhandle, crossing the northeast corner of New Mexico and then into southeastern Colorado. From there the drovers travelled to a point in eastern Colorado where the trail somewhat paralleled the Smoky Hill River. A definite northern terminus was not established because sale contracts often called for delivery of herds to specific ranches. One such arrangement in 1866-1868 illustrates the process. Colorado cattle baron, John W. Iliff, purchased 30,000 head of Texas longhorns from Charles Goodnight. Goodnight's trail crew drove the cattle north on Box Elder Road to Iliff's Crow Creek Ranch in the South Platte River Valley, not far from Gerry's old ranch. Only a few years earlier, in 1864, Goodnight had made his first trip along his namesake trail. However, he was not the first to drive cattle into northeastern Colorado.⁷

John C. Dawson snatched that prize in 1859 when he brought a herd up from Texas to sell to the residents of the gold camps. Dawson owned a cattle ranch in Texas and upon hearing of the boom along the South Platte, he decided to see if a good market for cattle existed there. Dawson's herd moved north-northwest from central

Texas through Oklahoma toward Cherry Creek. The trip succeeded beyond Dawson's imagination but as the Civil War tore the nation apart, drovers found they could not use Dawson's Trail. The War stopped all trail drives from Texas until Goodnight's 1864 adventure. Once normal relations between North and South resumed in 1865, herds followed both Dawson's and Goodnight's routes.⁸

A third path used to move longhorns from Texas to, and through, northeastern Colorado was the Ogallala Trail. The route terminated at Ogallala, Nebraska, and the Union Pacific Railroad after 1867. Although this trail was fairly far removed from Box Elder Creek, it helped further stimulate open range ranching in Colorado during the late 1860s. Drovers used this route to move cattle as far north as Montana. The Ogallala Trail approximately followed the present-day Colorado-Kansas border into Nebraska and received heavy usage from the late 1860s until the 1880s.⁹

By 1884 western stockgrowers petitioned Congress for Federal monies to maintain a "National Cattle Trail" from Texas to Montana as a fourth, later route. Part of this proposed route crossed northeastern Colorado very near the eastern border of this state, much as the Ogallala Trail did. Because of the availability of railroads from Texas to Midwestern markets like Chicago, Congress chose not to fund the "National" route. Yet herds continued to use it into the 1890s.¹⁰

Along any of the routes, including the early Box Elder Road, drovers faced potential problems. First, they had to find ways to feed and water their charges. Cattle needed water every three to six miles and grassy areas every fifteen miles or so, the length of a typical day's march. Because of the varying supply of vital needs, trails seldom had narrow boundaries. The cattle moved along at a reasonable pace but not so fast as to lose too much weight. Along the road, drovers controlled stampedes as well as protected the herd from marauding native Americans or cattle rustlers. The cowboys also had to be on the watch to protect the herds from other hazards such as the wrong food or bad water that might kill hundreds of animals.¹¹

The Box Elder trail, opened during the 1860s, had by the 1880s become a crucial element of economic life in the area. Cattlemen continued bringing their stock from southern Colorado to the South Platte River on the road. In addition to the road's role in moving herds and people through the area, Box Elder Creek and its associated road became something of an informal boundary between the large and small cattle ranches of northeastern Colorado during the 1870s. Evidence of that status as a boundary can be found as early as 1873. That year, as the Colorado Stock

Growers Association planned its annual round-up, delegates stated that nearly all the dairymen and small operators had their operations located west of Box Elder Creek, while the large ranches were east.¹² There can be no doubt of the role the trail played in providing communication and access to several ranches. For example, the Wellenkotter Ranch (HABS CO-126), founded in the late 1870s, was one many established along Box Elder Creek, during the Seventies and Eighties.

The importance of the road by the 1880s can be seen in the local ranchers' support for bestowing county road status to "the old road that has been traveled for the last twenty years."¹³ The County agreed and recognized the route as an Arapahoe County Road (No. 56) on October 2, 1883. The Arapahoe County Commissioners recognized Box Elder Road as County Road No. 56, being 60 feet wide and running "between the Creek and the said hills and along the line of an old traveled road."¹⁴ In March, 1885 the County realigned portions of the road. In both cases the County directed that the road be marked by two plow furrows and made no other provision for engineering or construction.¹⁵ A few years later, in 1890, the County realigned a portion of the road's southern end onto section lines. In both realignment cases the County straightened sections of the road, causing it to be moved slightly west, away from Box Elder Creek, to avoid the curves inherent in closely paralleling the creekbed. Segments of both the 1883 road and the 1885 realignment are visible.¹⁶ This realignment process may explain the fact that the road does not appear on the 1885 Nell's map of Colorado which does show a number of other roads in the Denver International Airport area.¹⁷ By the early 1870s Watkins served as the southern terminus of the road. The County abandoned the road during the 1940s, when Hudson Road from Watkins to State Highway 32 replaced it (see photocopies of 1906 and 1938 maps). After its abandon-ment, farmers utilized a portion of the trail in Section 12, T.2S., R.65W. as an access road between 104th Avenue and the Wellenkotter Ranch to the north.¹⁸

III. DESCRIPTION

Field recorders found segments of both the original 1860s trail which was utilized for the 1883 county road, and part of the 1885 realignment of the county road.¹⁹ These findings were confirmed by field observation conducted during preparation of this document. Other segments of the road may be extant outside the boundaries of the Denver International Airport that have not been identified in the present studies.

West of Box Elder Creek is the two-track remanent of the 1885 Box Elder Road. It extends from the east-west fence line in the center of Section 12, north to the Wellenkotter Ranch. On the west side of the two-track is the remanent of the earlier (pre-1885) trail. The newer (easternmost) trail is a rounded swale, about three feet high and eighteen feet across as it rounds a hillock south of the Wellenkotter ranch buildings (HABS CO-126). South of the hillock the road is less visible, but present. North toward the Wellenkotter Ranch the route is clearer and conforms to descriptions given in county records vis a vis avoiding Wellenkotter fences.²⁰ The older, westernmost, trail is more subtle on the landscape at this point and as a result is somewhat more difficult to discern. However, it can be found. It tends north and crosses the crest of the hill before rejoining the two-track. These segments are confined to the northeast 1/4 of Section 12. The lands are in native prairie, and as a result the trail segments in this parcel have been better preserved than elsewhere. The segments are in fair to good condition, easily visible on the landscape. Field recorders found no evidence of either route of the road outside the northeast 1/4 of Section 12. The lands beyond that quarter section are and have been cultivated fields. Plowing has erased visible traces of the road from the landscape.

Field recorders and later observers found no evidence of the use of engineering expertise in the design or construction of the Box Elder Road. Rather, it appears as if even before Arapahoe County officially recognized the road (County Road No. 56), local residents had established its route through customary use. As noted above the County marked the right of way with plow furrows. Such a vernacular heritage is typical of many early roads on the Colorado Plains during the late nineteenth century.

After its abandonment by the County, the right-of-way reverted to the landowners. Over time evidences of the majority of Box Elder Road have disappeared with cultivation, erosion and vegetation. The lands surrounding and including Box Elder Road were acquired by the City and County of Denver in 1989 as part of the site for the Denver International Airport. Presently, there are no plans to disturb these remains of Box Elder Road. It will be one-half mile north of proposed runaway 27R and should not be impacted by construction. The site is to be preserved passively, with avoidance as the primary tool for protection.

IV. ENDNOTES

1. Steven F. Mehls, The New Empire of the Rockies, A History of Northeastern Colorado, Cultural Resources Series #16, (Denver: Bureau of Land Management, 1984), pp. 51-53.

2. Rocky Mountain News, spring and summer, 1864, especially 23 July, 11 August, 17 August, 25 August, 26 August and 30 September 1864; and Nell B. Propst, Forgotten People, A History of the South Platte Trail, (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 53-60.

3. U.S.D.I., Bureau of Land Management, "Survey Plats for Townships 1 through 5 south, Ranges 64-65 west," 1867, microfiche on file at Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State Office, Lakewood, CO.

4. Ibid., and Adams County Road Department, "Survey Plat of Arapahoe County Road No. 56, 1885," Adams County Road Book A-1, copy on file at Adams County Clerk and Recorder's Office, Brighton, CO.

5. Arapahoe County contained all of modern Denver, Arapahoe and Adams Counties until 1902 when voters approved the establishment of the City and County of Denver and Adams County from lands in Arapahoe County. In 1988 the NDIA area was annexed to Denver County to permit construction of the airport.

6. David Allen Henderson, "The Beef Cattle Industry in Colorado," (M.A. Thesis, University of Colorado, 1951), p. 10.

7. Ora B. Peake, The Colorado Range Cattle Industry, (Glendale, CA.: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1937), pp. 22-24, and Paul D. Friedman, "Historic Properties Preservation Plan For the New Denver International Airport, Denver County, Colorado," September 14, 1990, New Denver Airport Office, Stapleton International Airport, Denver, CO, p. 97.

8. Peake, Range Cattle, pp. 21-24.

9. Ibid., and S.A. Munson interview, Civil Works Administration, vol. 351, typescript on file Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO.

10. Margaret Long, The Smoky Hill Trail, (Denver: W.H. Kistler Stationery Co., 1943), p. vii., and Peake, Range Cattle, pp. 30-32.

11. Richard Goff and Robert H. McCaffree, Century in the Saddle, (Denver: Colorado Cattlemen's Centennial Commission, 1967), pp. 38-39, and Peake, Range Cattle, pp. 31-37.

12. Goff and McCaffree, Century Saddle, p. 60.

13. Adams County Road Book A-1, description of Road 56.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Friedman, "Historic Properties," p. 97.; and Adams County Map of 1906 reproduced in Albin Wagner, Adams County. Crossroads of the West, 2 vols. (Brighton: Adams County Commissioners, 1977) vol. II, pp. 28-29.

17. Chain, Hardy & Co., "Nell's Topographical and Township Map of the State of Colorado," 1885, copy on file Western History Collections, Norlin Library, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO.

18. Friedman, "Historic Properties," p. 97.

19. This description relies heavily on Dames & Moore field work completed during 1989 for the description of the extant portion of Box Elder Road.

20. Friedman, "Historic Properties," p. 97.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

Brighton, CO. Adams County Clerk & Records Office.
Adams County Road Book A-1.

Denver, CO. Colorado Historical Society. Civil Works
Administration (CWA) vol. 351.

Friedman, Paul D. "Historic Properties Preservation Plan For the
New Denver International Airport, Denver County, Colorado."
New Denver Airport Office. Stapleton International Airport.
Denver, CO. 14 September 1990.

Henderson, David Allen. "The Beef Cattle Industry in Colorado."
M.A. Thesis, University of Colorado, 1951.

Boulder, CO. Western History Collections. Norlin Library.
University of Colorado. Margaret Long Collection.

Lakewood, CO. U.S.D.I. Bureau of Land Management. Survey Plats.
1867. microfiche copies.

B. PUBLISHED SOURCES

Chain, Hardy & Co., "Nell's Topographical and Township Map of the
State of Colorado." 1885. copy on file Western History
Collections. Norlin Library. University of Colorado. Boulder,
CO.

Goff, Richard Goff and McCaffree, Robert H. Century in the Saddle.
Denver: Colorado Cattlemen's Centennial Commission, 1967.

Long, Margaret. The Smoky Hill Trail. Denver: W.H. Kistler
Stationery Co., 1943.

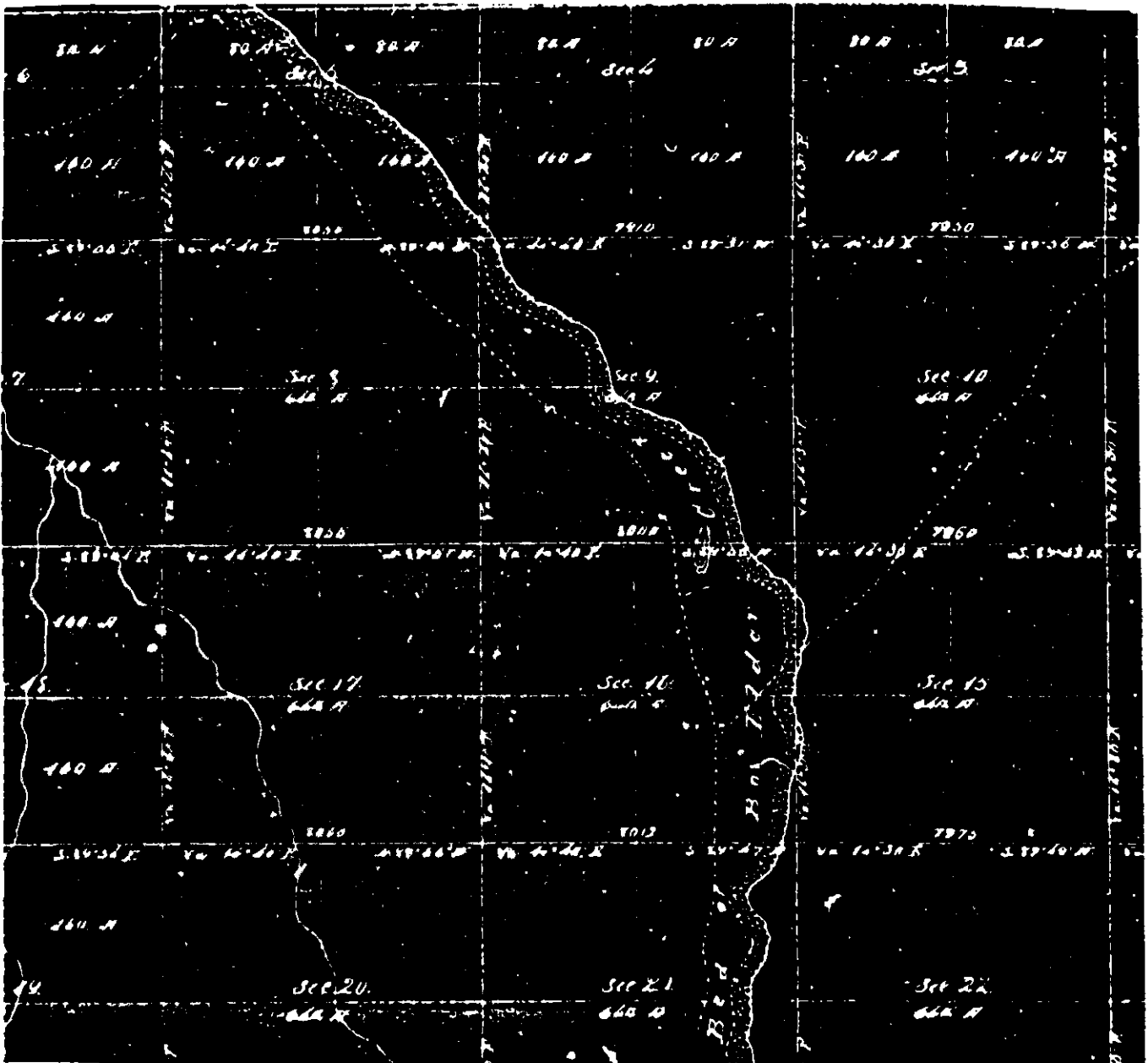
Mehls, Steven F. The New Empire of the Rockies, A History of
Northeastern Colorado. Cultural Resources Series #16. Denver:
Bureau of Land Management, 1984.

Peake, Ora B. The Colorado Range Cattle Industry. Glendale, CA.:
The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1937.

Propst, Nell Brown. Forgotten People, A History of the South Platte Trail. Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1979.

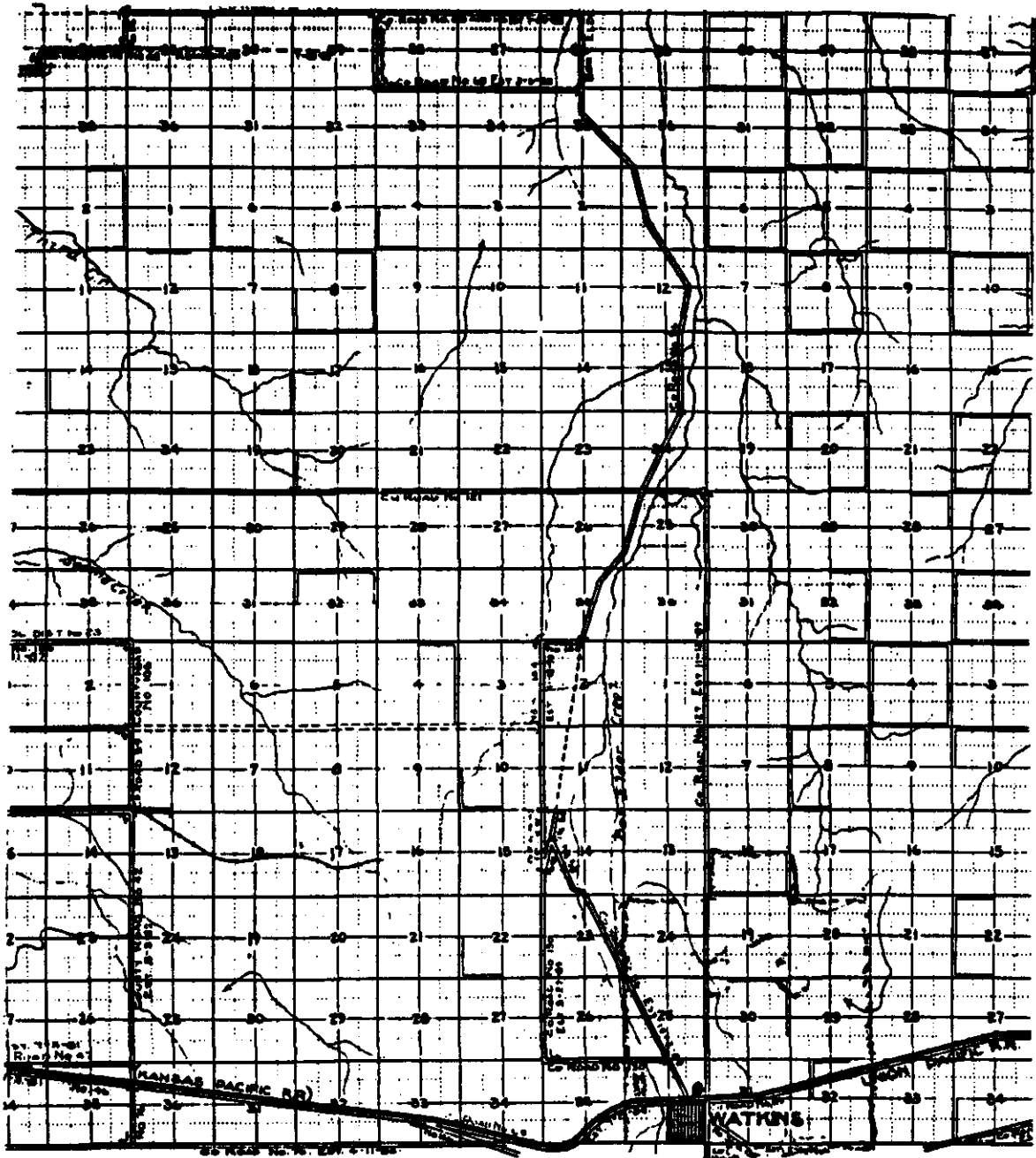
Rocky Mountain News, March-October 1864.

Wagner, Albin. Adams County, Crossroads of the West. 2 vols. Brighton: Adams County Commissioners, 1977.



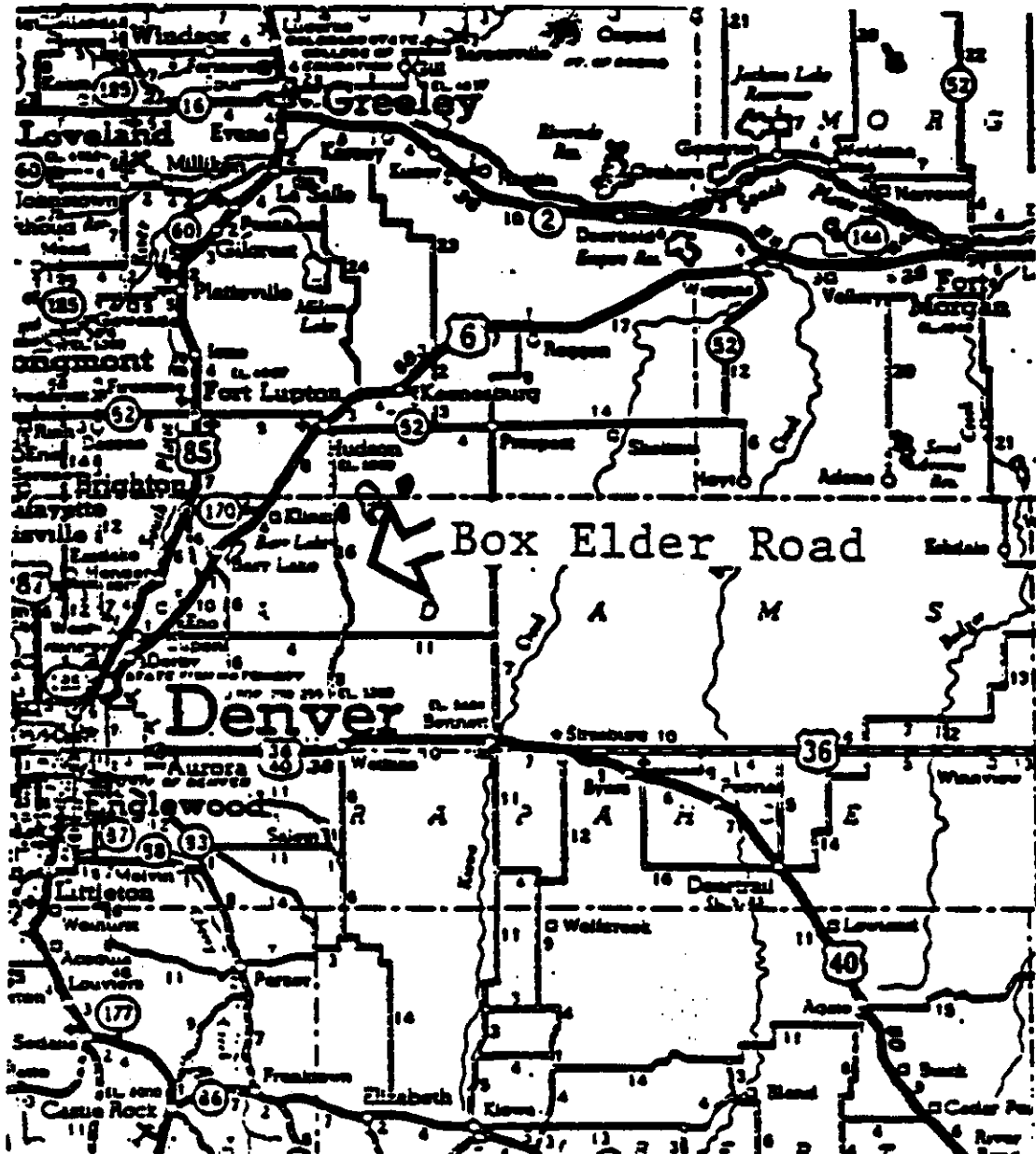
Copied from:

U.S.D.I., Bureau of Land Management, "Survey Plat for Township 4 south, Range 64 west," 1867, microfiche on file at Bureau of Land Management, Colorado State Office, Lakewood, CO. Illustrates junction area of Smoky Hill North Trail and Box Elder Road.



Copied from:

Albin Wagner, Adams County, Crossroads of the West. 2 vols. (Brighton: Adams County Commissioners, 1977), p. 29. This map illustrates Box Elder Road and its relationship to the other roads in the west central portion of Adams County, Colorado, during the early years of the twentieth century.



Copied from:

1938 Colorado State Highway Map, Colorado map folder, Margaret Long Collection, Western History Collections, Norlin Library, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO. This map illustrates Box Elder Road near the end of its life as a County Road